

Batman: Police State

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Category: Batman

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 1999-12-24 08:00:00

Updated: 1999-12-24 08:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 11:25:28

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 9,395

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: 20 years in the future, Robin returns to find a Gotham drastically changed.

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The snow was thick on the tarmac of Gotham International Airport, just as it had been twenty years ago when he'd been headed the other way.

Timothy Drake strode off the single-engine commercial jet into the cool morning air, pulling his trenchcoat tighter about him. He watched his breath curl, and felt a wave of nostalgia hit. Twenty years ago he'd been college age, with a passport and a social conscience. Now he was taller, broader, more tanned, but still in fighting form, and bearing the satisfaction of having accomplished his mission.

He was home. Most would consider him mad, trading the majestic grasslands of South Africa for the urban stewing pot that was Gotham City. But this would always be home to him, always be his rightful place in the world. This was the place where he first made a difference, where he first graced the sky as Robin the Boy Wonder, colorful compatriot to the Dark Knight himself. This was where his roots lay.

The entrance to the terminal building whooshed open at his approach, and he immediately noticed two large, free-standing metal detectors on either side of the doorway. 'Metal detector,' he supposed, was a somewhat archaic term, for, this being the age of international terrorism, they probably scanned for anything and everything that could be used as a weapon.

He passed the detectors without incident, and looked around the expansive terminal. It struck him as odd that the place was almost

deserted, aside from the passengers of his flight. Come to think of it, it had been hard to find a flight in at a reasonable hour. Hard times, he decided. Too bad. The Gotham he remembered had been a bustling, if crime-ridden, port of call.

A shrill whine reached his ears, one recognized universally as a siren. He spun toward the metal detectors, where a small man stood, panic-stricken. He was stocky and balding, a typical businessman in a conservative suit and tie. The fear in his eyes was withering.

Without his thinking it, Tim's feet slid apart, and his shoulders squared as his hands balled into fists. Old habits die hard. He lowered his voice an octave, to a more commanding level. "Is there a problem, sir?"

The man shrugged. "I..." He rummaged through his pockets, and produced a vial of pills. "This is all I... all I have. I don't---"

The man let out a blood-curdling scream, as a glistening blade sliced into his wrist. The vial fell away, and the man crumpled to his knees. His eyes widened at the sight of his blood spilling to the slate-gray floor.

Tim's head swiveled, his gaze retracing the path of the blade and coming to rest on a figure crouched in the rafters. "Batman!" he cried, and realized instantly he was wrong.

The figure rappelled slowly downward. At a glance, he bore a resemblance to the Batman Tim remembered from his teenage years, but upon closer inspection the differences were evident. The figure was shorter, bulkier, and the costume was... more of a uniform. That, and there was nary a flash of recognition in his eyes as he pushed past his one-time sidekick toward the bleeding passenger.

Somewhere in Tim's periphery there appeared a second 'Batman,' and the two set upon the small man, unleashing a vicious barrage of punches and kicks.

As Tim's mind struggled to process the scene, he noticed the vial roll to a stop against the toe of his loafer. He knelt, and scanned the label. Nitro gliscorine tablets. Nitro gliscorine was a substance commonly used in explosives, true, but even more commonly used to combat heart problems.

"Stop!" he beseeched the Batmen, "Stop! You've made a mistake!"

The balding man was on his stomach now, but still they unleashed their wrath. He looked up through swollen eyes at the sound of Tim's voice, a glimmer of hope re-ignited.

"Back off, Sonny," one of the assaulters muttered through clenched teeth. Tim rocked back on his heels, astonished. Who were these people, that they would dare defile a legend, defile a symbol of justice, like this? The Mantle of the Bat was to be worn with respect. The wearer bore an awesome responsibility, one Tim would never wish upon anyone, but one that these thugs were shucking like so much dead skin. He set his jaw, and rolled up his sleeves.

Springing forward, he coiled an arm about the first Batman's--- he had yet to decide on a better name for them--- neck, and clawed at his arms. He did his best to slow, if not stop, the assault, all the time yelling, "You've made a mistake!"

Finally, the Batman spun, and shoved him roughly to the ground, while his partner continued beating their suspect into submission. "The Knights don't make mistakes," he barked coldly, and seized Tim's arm, twisting it behind his back. Tim cried out as he felt his shoulder strain. The unmistakable feeling of a pair of handcuffs clamping about his wrists only infuriated him more, and he bucked violently, throwing the 'Knight' backward.

The cuffs refused to budge, and he quickly tired of struggling with them. Instead, he lowered his shoulder, and charged. With bone-jarring force he connected with the first Knight, who was bowled over the little man into the second.

The man stood on shaky legs, and mopped sweat and blood from his brow, gushing his thanks. Tim only nodded, glaring at the Knights in a heap on the floor.

One of the Knights rose, and his hand blurred as it darted in and out of his waistband at the small of his back. He now held some sort of weapon, and Tim barked, "Down!" while at the same time twisting to protect his fellow passenger's beaten body with his own.

The Knight fired twice. Tim felt a burst of pain in his abdomen, and suddenly all was black.

He awoke with a jolt, instantly aware that he was moving.

"Careful," came an unremarkable voice as he sat up. "You went down pretty hard."

Tim blinked, and moved to rub the throbbing from his forehead, but his wrists were still handcuffed. He cursed, and swiveled until he found the source of the voice. It was the little man from the airport, still looking beaten, but a bit calmer. "Where are we?"

"We're in the back of a Knight-van," the little man informed him. He let out a long, pained breath. "The wife warned me, you know. Don't go to Gotham City. They'll arrest you for looking at them with the wrong eye. They'll put you down in the street like a dog. But did I listen?" He didn't bother to answer himself, only sank lower on the hard, stainless steel bench.

"Who's 'they'?" Tim asked, but, before he got a response, there was the distinctive squeal of brakes, and the van ground to a halt.

The rear doors of the van cycled open, and two Knights leapt in. They dragged Tim and his compatriot out into the street. Tim looked around. He was in midtown Gotham, he was sure of that much, but the usual bustle of traffic, vehicular and pedestrian, was... non-existent. There was no one on the street.

His stomach began to tighten. Something was very wrong.

They were both hustled toward a building Tim recognized instantly. As well he should, for it was the tallest building in Gotham, one he'd scaled many times in his younger days. Wayne Tower, headquarters of the various Wayne corporations, every bit as gothic and imposing as the day he'd first seen it. Finally, a familiar landmark. But why was he being brought here?

The lobby was equally imposing, massive, with marble floors and granite pillars, and the odd sprinkling of houseplants here and there. He and the little man were hustled to the reception desk, where a clerk--- wearing a less armored variation of the Knight uniform--- greeted them. "ID," he barked.

The two Knights who'd escorted them in produced Two wallets, one of them Tim's. Were these the two he'd attacked in the airport? He couldn't tell.

The clerk rifled through the first wallet, tossed it aside. "Marvin Summel, you are remanded to Holding Cell B-8 until a trial date is arranged." The little man whimpered, and the clerk made the necessary edits to his file on the computer pad atop the desk. Then he lifted Tim's wallet. His eyes widened for a moment, and he drummed on the keypad, calling up some file Tim couldn't see. "Tim... Timothy Drake?"

"Yeah." Tim straightened.

The clerk was suddenly very harried. He left the desk at a jog, and darted into one of the bronze-plated elevators that bordered an entire wall of the lobby. Five minutes later, his face red and sweat-covered, he returned. "Let him go," he told the Knights. As Tim's cuffs were removed, he murmured, "My apologies on behalf of the Knights of Gotham, Mister Drake. Unit One would like to see you now."

Tim observed a collective gasp from those around him as the clerk steered him toward an elevator. "This is more like it," he snapped, and cast his captors a dangerous glare.

The elevator was pre-programmed. It rocketed straight to the top story of Wayne Tower, the one hundredth story. He straightened his collar as he exited. Someone was going to get a piece of his mind over this whole fiasco. That someone---

---appeared at the opposite end of the wood-paneled hallway. Bruce Wayne himself. The harsh words Tim had been composing caught in his throat. Bruce was white about the temples, and his cheeks were a bit gaunt, but he still wore the proportions of a professional body-builder, and wore them well. A warm smile graced his face--- only Tim would recognize the smile, while others considered it more of a grimace--- as he approached. "Tim!" He thrust out a hand, a hand Tim seized and shook.

"Long time, Bruce," Long time, boss, mentor, friend.

Bruce led the way to his office, as swank and well-decorated as the rest of the building. Tim was struck by the atmosphere presented, a lived-in feel that the office had never had before. During his tenure as Batman, Bruce had rarely set foot in this building. Could it be

that he lived here now?

"I had no idea you were coming into town." Bruce moved easily, confidently, without the stiffness that usually accompanies old age. He sank into a plush leather chair. "It's great to see you. Drink?" From his desk drawer he produced a bottle of Jameson's Whiskey, and poured himself a generous glass as he waited for a response.

Tim declined politely, interested in the fact that the bottle had been placed so conveniently near by. Bruce certainly had changed.

"So," Bruce began, gesturing his old friend to a grain leather armchair, "what brings you to town? Tired of fighting off lions and tigers?"

Tim smiled. Bruce was as, if not more, educated than him, and well aware of the evolutionary state of the African continent in this day and age. The remark was a joke, nothing more, and one he'd let slide. "There's a new breed on the way in. Young diplomats and radicals. It's time to pass the torch. I thought I'd come home, put my feet up for a few years."

"You did what you went to do?"

Tim nodded. "The remnants of apartheid have been swept away. The tide is turning. There's a diplomatic assembly up and running. All the guerrillas have been talked out of the hills to the bargaining table. I'd say we'll see a united Africa inside of fifty years."

Bruce toasted him. "That was the difference between you and me, son. I could never see outside the walls of the city."

And odd turn of phrase, Tim thought to himself. What to make of it? Things had changed so much. Perhaps Gotham actually did have walls now.

"So where are you staying?" Bruce asked next.

"Well, I was planning on staying at Wayne Manor, if that's all right with you..."

Bruce shook his head. "The Manor's shut up. I live here now." He smiled again, a smile coming much too easily and much too often, very obviously helped into existence by the bottle in his hand. Tim was suddenly uneasy. "It's closer to work," he explained.

He rummaged in his desk for a moment, and finally tossed Tim an access card. "Dick kept an apartment a few blocks east of here. I never bothered to sell it after he left for Bludhaven. You can use it."

Tim nodded his thanks, and pocketed the keys. His gaze never swayed from the whiskey. "How much of that have you had?"

"Enough to get me through the day."

The Bruce Wayne of the past had been detached, but never deliberately evasive. It was all suddenly too much for Tim. "Bruce... About your 'work'..."

Bruce took a long sip. "I'm sorry about your run-in at the airport. I would've liked to show you the new system myself, in a more... humane... way."

"This... new system... what's going on?" Tim strove desperately to keep any tension from his voice.

Bruce contemplated. "I'm... I'm what you'd call the police commissioner, I suppose."

Tim rose despite himself, struggling to keep from pacing. "Those aren't police down there, they're freakin' Gestapo agents!" The remark hurt, he saw. "I mean... really, Bruce, isn't this a little... extreme?"

Bruce's face, no, his whole being, seemed to darken. "Look... A lot of things happened while you were gone, Tim. I don't want to get into details. The Batman wasn't enough. The police weren't effective. I finally figured out a way to--- to squash crime!" His fist pounded on the desk as he swept an arm toward the window, and the skyline beyond. "I did what I had to do!"

"You can't sacrifice liberty for order, dammit!" Tim seized the edge of the desk, any thoughts of keeping his temper lost in a whirlwind of horror. "I've spent twenty years drilling that into the heads of the diplomats in Africa. Police States might keep the crime rate down, but the people won't be happy---"

"You wouldn't understand!" Bruce's arm shot out, and he shoved Tim solidly. Then he sank back into his chair, and inhaled the rest of the whiskey. "Take the keys. Get out. You can stay in Gotham as long as you want. Just stay out of my way."

Tim stalked from the room, slamming the door behind him.

The apartment was musty, thanks to decades worth of moisture. It was like stepping into a time warp, littered with reminders of the nuances of daily life. The kitchen appliances were all that cream white that had more or less been barred from the market for its monotony. On a small table in the bedroom was a huge desktop computer, from an age before PCs could slide easily in and out of desk drawers. There were even pens and pencils scattered about, scattered writing utensils that Tim recalled with some amount of fondness.

There were also reminders of Dick.

Dick Grayson had been Tim's predecessor as Robin, and later the vigilante Nightwing. If Bruce had been the father figure of the Batman family, Nightwing had been the older brother Tim had always wanted. But Batman had always pushed him away, not daring to close the emotional void between them, until finally Dick had been pushed past the point of no return, and struck out on his own. Tim had envied him for that, and at the same time despaired at his audacity, at his attempt to create a mythos in Nightwing that could possibly rival that of the Batman. The thought was laughable. Nightwing would forever be in the Shadow of the Bat.

But the little personal items around the apartment were of Dick

Grayson, a man in his own right. There were dust-covered issues of Car & Driver, and a rusted set of weights. There was a New Testament Bible on the coffee table, next to a mug embroidered with the Teen Titans logo. A Flying Graysons poster was tacked to one wall, beside photos of Dick and his one-time wife, Barbara, and of his friends at the Teen Titans and Justice League. It was quite a museum, really, a trip down memory lane that made Tim feel a bit less out of place.

And as his feelings of awkwardness, his perceptions that his coming home was somehow an intrusion, ebbed, they were replaced by a spark of curiosity. How had things come to this? How had Bruce gone over the top, how had he been forced into taking things to extremes. There had to have been some cause, some detail that would help Tim understand the old man. There had to be something.

Of course, he'd been gone for twenty years. He might as well have been a first-time tourist. His investigatory resources were practically non-existent. He searched his memory methodically. Who would be willing and able to talk to Bruce, who probably knew the whole story and had the guts to stay in Gotham after the shift in power?

Finally, a name bobbed to the surface in his mind.

Every city has a handful of suburban neighborhoods known as 'cop lands.' Every city has a few nice quiet streets, away from all the hustle and bustle, where the men and women of law enforcement put down roots in relative safety, bring their families, enjoy a respite from duty and violence to be average people doing average things. They buy small, weathered houses, meager but sufficient, next to their fellow officers, so that each morning as they leave for work there's a smiling, sympathetic face in the neighboring yard, a face that knows the types of hell the working day will bring.

Jim Gordon had lived in this cop land outside Gotham for most of his adult life. As police commissioner, his was the larger house on the block, but he spent his Sundays out mowing the lawn in the summer and shoveling the driveway in the winter, just like his subordinates. Jim was not a social animal, and didn't make many friends. But he enjoyed the benevolent atmosphere of the cop land, enjoyed having found a place where he could let his guard down, where he could close his eyes and let his alertness slide away. Here, he let his muscles relax. He stopped his eyes from sweeping about constantly, searching for danger, and his hand from always inching up his coat toward his shoulder holster, just in case.

Or at least, he had once enjoyed such things. But now his cop land was a prison, with a new name.

The Pound.

Jim Gordon had not let his police force simply be assimilated, not even by someone he had once called a friend. He and his neighbors had fought back, and fought back hard. Bruce Wayne, whom Jim could not bring himself to call 'Batman' any longer, had placed each and every rebelling officer under twenty-four hour house arrest, here in the Pound. There was a Knight in every driveway, always at attention, and a Knight-van at each end of the street.

Jim longed for the days when his eyes could roam freely about, searching for danger, and he had a shoulder holster for his hand to edge toward.

On this particular evening he'd been allowed to sit out on the porch, and watch the sun descend on the city. Years of staring at the same walls every day had aged him badly, and given him a tight, bitter smile that he wore constantly. Still, he took pleasure in the little things, things like watching sunsets.

Tim saw him from one end of the street, and almost did a double take. The years had not been kind to James W Gordon. Still, he was--- had been--- one of Batman's only friends, and a major player in the city for as long as he could remember. Who better to talk to?

"Jim!" he called, but Gordon didn't stir. He hadn't heard. "Jim!"

There came from behind the telltale whoosh of an object arcing through the air, and Tim heard a crack, and felt a sharp pain in his right shoulder. A Knight seized him by the collar, and propelled him toward the end of the street. "What do you think you're doing in here?"

Tim's heart sank. Things were really, really, bad. "Why can't I come in?"

"The Pound is off limits."

"I'm a tourist. I didn't---"

The Knight's expression never fluctuated, but he released his hold, and gestured with the butt of a mean-looking rifle. "Fine. Get out of here. Don't come back."

Tim nodded as submissively as he could manage, and stumbled out of view.

He'd have to try a different tactic.

Earlier in the evening, Tim had found a pile of sleek black-and-blue Nightwing costumes piled in a walk-in closet. He donned one quickly, fluently, and inspected himself in the full-length mirror nearby. His jaw dropped slightly. He was every inch the presence Nightwing had been in the outfit. The Kevlar chestplate and leadweight batons were a welcome weight, a weight that gave him a confident swagger as he strolled toward the window.

The rush he got as he took to the window was incredible. It had been so long since his every sense had been so awake. Without hesitation, he plunged into the air, loosing grappling cable as he plummeted. He wasn't quite as acrobatic as he'd once been, but he'd kept in shape. It felt absolutely amazing to be hurtling across the skyline, all at once surreal and razor-sharp. he bounded from building to building, experimenting with various mid-air contortions to determine his level of skill. He kept to the shadows as best he could. The last thing he needed right now was the Knights of Gotham raining down upon him. Still, he was a performer at heart, an exhibitionist, and he turned a few heads as he catapulted past window after window.

Eventually, he reached the Pound. He moved fluidly, silently, crawling through bushes and limping over fences, finally scaling the weather-beaten siding to a second-story window of Gordon's home. Night had descended on the city now, like a heavy curtain, and Tim blended effortlessly. He moved with assuredness, deftly jimmying the window open.

There was a Knight on the landing, apparently just coming on duty and checking on the commissioner. Tim flattened himself against a wall until the guard passed. There was something almost sacrilegious about that uniform that set his teeth on edge. But still he restrained himself, waiting until the Knight had stepped out onto the porch before he slipped into Gordon's room.

Gordon was instantly awake, sitting up in bed. "Who's there?" he barked.

"Shh," Tim implored. Moonlight flooded in from a small window, and Tim stepped into it.

"You!" Gordon's face lit up. "My God!"

"Yeah, me. Sort of." Tim perched on the end of the bed. "I'm, uh... I was... Robin." Gordon absorbed that much well enough, and decided to plunge straight in. "Commissioner... What the hell happened here?"

Gordon warmed immediately to his old title, and fumbled on the nightstand for his glasses. "It's... sort of a long story."

"I've got time."

Gordon nodded. "Sure." He pondered for a long moment, trying to phrase his words. "Well... It started fifteen years ago. God, fifteen years." His eyes bore into Tim's. "Some dumb-ass villain, a techno-freak with an entire army, he stormed the city. Supremator, or something stupid like that. He was a bad one, his guys trashed everything in sight. He incited riots and looters and general public unrest. Laid waist to a lot of the inner city. My guys were working twenty-four seven. So was your boss." He twitched suddenly, as if he thought he might've heard something, but decided he hadn't, and continued. "It took us the better part of a month to round up this guy's army. Then he took me hostage. Batman, he laid down half a fortune in ransom, and he revealed his identity to the public. Those were the terms for my release. He had no choice. This Supremator guy disappeared. But the riots went on for weeks. The city was in shambles. I was a wreck. Batman was a wreck. He snapped." Gordon sank against his pillow. "Walked into my office one day with a dozen of the more disillusioned riot officers behind him. He'd evidently talked them into joining him. Anyway, he says he's taking control, he 'escorts' me into the street, and that was that."

"It's been like this for fifteen years?" If Tim's heart sank any further, he realized, he'd be cleaning it out of his boots. "Why didn't you do anything?"

"I tried. Of course I tried. Why do you think there's a guard on my doorstep?" Gordon shook his head. "Bruce is too good. The Justice League even came in once, at the government's request, tried to take Gotham back. Bruce sent them packing inside of an hour. After that,

your type stopped coming to the rescue." He drew a breath. "The Knights control the city. Every aspect of it. Anyone who tries to break the system is dealt with quickly. Severely."

"Fairly?"

Gordon laughed, a bitter, mirthless laugh. "Times've been hard, son. Your boss's changed."

Tim nodded. "It's time he changed back." The weight of his statement reached him instantly, but he was not prepared to back down. "Desperate times call for desperate measures. Are you with me, Jim?" He extended a gloved hand. "Commissioner?"

Jim Gordon shook his hand firmly. That done, he turned over and feigned falling asleep. He waited until the vigilante had melted away, and his eyes flew open, alive with thoughts of what the next few days would bring.

Bruce awoke with a start, cold and clammy. Perspiration matted his brow, and a throbbing rattled his brain.

He was at his desk, an empty whiskey bottle in the garbage can nearby. He shivered, and wondered at the throbbing in his head. Suddenly, he realized it was not internal, but external.

Gathering himself, he jabbed a small button on the varnished pine surface, and part of the bookshelf in the opposite wall cycled back to reveal a small viewscreen. The words INCOMING TRANSMISSION appeared, and Bruce did his best to arrange his shirt collar as he waited.

"Bruce." The unmistakable visage of Lex Luthor filled the screen, smiling wolfishly.

Bruce suppressed a grimace. "Lex. You called?"

"Anticipation, my friend." Luthor was all too at ease with the situation. Casually, he continued, "I thought perhaps you might be calling soon, requesting more funds?"

Bruce nodded. "Actually, yes. There was a fire in midtown, some looting. Some of the Kevlar uniforms got scorched. I could use---"

"Ah ah ah." Luthor's teeth shone. "I'll put the cheque in the mail, Bruce, but I'll need a little something in return."

Bruce mentally took hold of Luthor's neck, and began squeezing. How had he ever entered into this Faustian bargain in the first place. Then he remembered. He'd been down on his luck, out of pocket after ransoming Gordon. You need money to run a private, city-wide police force, lots of it. Luthor had been the only one willing to step up to the plate, and he hadn't let Bruce forget it.

"There's an environmentalist group, the Lone Wolves... Heard of them? No? A rowdy, tree-hugging bunch. They're planning a demonstration on the LexCorp Industrial Plant in Gotham. Tomorrow. I'd... be much obliged if your men would... intervene. For the sake of public safety, of course." The smile again.

Bruce agreed. "Of course. And the money?"

"En route."

The connection severed, and Bruce slumped in his chair.

A few hours of uneasy sleep saw Tim surprisingly refreshed, consumed as he was with thoughts of the previous night's sortie, and the memories it reawakened. He channel-surfed idly, waiting for his coffee to cool some, while running through a few early morning calisthenics he happened to know.

A News Flash from CNN's foreign correspondent in Gotham captured his attention. A rather large group of eco-warriors, the Lone Wolves, were marching on LexCorp Industrial Plant. As the camera panned across the enraged town, the reporter intoned in barely objective terms that the Knights of Gotham were on their way, en masse, to make sure things stayed within the confines of the law. The word law was stressed awkwardly, almost sardonically. Tim's interest was roused.

Inside of half an hour, he'd spirited himself once more into Gordon's bedroom, decked out in the Nightwing costume. "I'm going out to the LexCorp plant, to mix things up a little, see what I can do," he informed the old man. "If you wanna move on this, move now. The Knights'll be occupied with the protest. Your boys and girls should be able to break out of here."

Gordon nodded. "I made a few calls last night. Everybody on the block is ready to move on my order."

Nightwing moved to the window. "Get as many guys as you can out. I'll meet up with you later." He thought for a long moment, then a smile slowly dawned over his chiseled features. "There's a cave under old Wayne Manor. There're a few entrances in the yard. Not hard to find if you're looking for them. We'll meet up there." With that, he threw himself haphazardly into the air.

Gordon immediately sprang to his feet. There was work to be done.

Tim's first glimpse of the protest was an aerial one, from a grapple line high above one of Gotham's nicer industrial parks. It seemed to him a teeming mass of color splashed across the drab gray landscape. Suddenly the mass was being eroded away, by a wall of blue.

The Knights waded into the crowd, projecting a stoic arrogance that instilled fear into their prey. And there was plenty of prey to go around. They stunned and beat and arrested at random, meting out harsh and brutal punishment and meeting little resistance. The entire scene was quite chilling.

Tim arched his back and hurtled downward. At just the right moment, the rope in his hands went taught, and his momentum propelled him along, skimming the crowd. A great cheer rose from the assembly as the first Knight found his way into Tim's line of sight, and the vigilante felled him with a vicious kick.

The brawl was on.

Buoyed by the cheers of the protesters, Tim descended as though descending from Heaven. Minor scuffles were breaking out all over the place, and he quickly spiraled into the fray, fists flailing.

On an intellectual level, of course, he would always abhor such a blatant display of violence. But on some basic, instinctual level, the adrenaline in his blood drew him into a sort of euphoria. Little things, the taste of blood, the bruising of his knuckles, the thrill of a challenge, they electrified his very being.

He dispatched Knight after Knight, each one falling with an expression of pure surprise at being confronted, surprise at losing.

All of a sudden, Tim was spent. His energy left him. He wasn't as young as he used to be, and he'd overdone himself. He paused in the midst of the ruckus, and drew a sharp breath. All he needed was a few seconds of rest, to recharge---

In an instant, an arm was coiled about his torso, and a rifle butt connected solidly with his head. He murmured a curse as his legs gave out. His perception was dimming, but he was aware of a handful of Knights about him, and handcuffs being forced around his wrists.

Again.

Gordon was on the edge of his seat, watching the melee on the television monitor. The time was almost right, he decided, fingering the harmonica in his breast pocket. Almost...

Somewhere outside, a loudspeaker squelched for attention. "All units," it boomed, monotone, "emergency situation. Illegal public assembly in progress. Report to barracks for strategic reassignment. Again, emergency situation---"

Gordon's breath caught in his chest. He waited a few tantalizing seconds for all the Knights to move from their posts, to be scattered about in disarray. Then he darted down the stairs and out onto the porch. As he went, he flipped the harmonica to his mouth, and, like Robin Hood in the days of old, blew on it as hard as he could. At the summons, every resident on the block, perhaps two dozen in all, surged into the street. As one, Gordon in the lead, they sprinted for the street's end. They piled into rapidly hot-wired Knight-vans, and took off into the urban wasteland, their captors left gaping at the retreat.

Gordon leaned out the passenger side of a van, exuberant. It had been a long time since he'd felt wind rifle his hair, and longer still since he'd had a mission to accomplish. He was suddenly more alive than he'd ever been.

He thought little about the difficulties his mission presented.

The courtroom was enormous, with large paneled windows and varnished benches running the width of it. Tim, in shackles and surrounded by an entourage of Knights, all grim-faced, entered through great oak doors. Despite his predicament, he couldn't help but gaze around curiously. The room had a cold, utilitarian quality, yet the people

seated in it (and the place was packed) seemed almost reverent of the surroundings, as though it were an important historical sight.

They rounded a pillar in the center aisle, upon which a huge video camera was mounted, and shuffled to the front row. At the head of the room was the judge's bench, on high and imposing. Behind it, an awesome silver bat symbol seemed to consume the wall.

"Attention!"

Each Knight in the room rose to his feet, heels clicking sharply together in unison. Tim's eyes were aflame as he was struck by the Nazi-ish qualities of the rigmarole, and the knowledge that Bruce Wayne was the one who'd implemented it.

A door behind the judge's bench opened, and Bruce himself stepped out, sporting a smart Knight's dress uniform, minus the helmet. He took his seat, and commanded, "Let the proceedings begin," into his microphone. There was the necessary shuffle of clothing as the Knights sat, and Bruce began.

"Timothy Drake, you have been charged with the following crimes." His expression, his posture, were neutral as he recited, but his eyes darted about wildly, betraying a distinct unease. "One count of disturbing the peace. One count of encouraging disorder. One count of inflammatory clothing. Multiple counts of assaulting a person of law. Are you prepared to answer to these charges?"

Tim stood, suddenly very concerned about the absence of a jury. Surely this wasn't a kangaroo court, surely Bruce didn't play the role of judge, jury, and---

He shivered.

"No, I am not. I object to Your Honor's presence, on the grounds that our personal relationship could mar your judgment."

Bruce considered, suddenly very aware of the camera. "Objection denied. It is the opinion of the court that Timothy Drake is competent and prepared to answer to the presented charges. Let the record so indicate." He took a sip of what looked like water, but, Tim realized, could just as easily be gin. "How do you plead?"

Gordon paced, agitated. Robin should be here by now.

They'd found the Batcave easily enough, and his men were having a fine time examining the various exhibits and examples of gadgetry. But they'd been waiting for nine hours now, and the vigilante was nowhere to be found.

"Commissioner!" someone cried, and he turned, feeling his heart skip at the title once again. "You'd better take a look at this."

Gordon followed the officer to an expensive flatscreen television embedded in the cave wall. On the screen, Tim Drake was staring at a point of camera, looking determined and enraged. Gordon inspected his surroundings. "He's in court! Dammit! He must've been arrested."

"What'll we do, sir?" the officer petitioned.

Gordon considered. "Jonesy, make sure nobody strays outside the cave. And tell the boys to help themselves to anything they find in the armory. We'll need it later." He started off at a run.

"Where're you going, sir?"

Gordon flashed a charismatic smile he'd forgotten he was capable of. "I'm the cavalry."

Tim had pleaded not guilty. It had meant nothing.

Knight after Knight stepped out to the judge's bench, each indistinguishable from his predecessor, and intoned solemnly the various ways in which he'd been assaulted by the defendant. Tim was exasperated. Finally, he could take it no longer, and shot to his feet. "Your Honor! Request permission to cross-examine the witness!"

"Denied," Bruce quipped flatly, saw the spark of indignation in Tim's expression, and added, "You're unfamiliar with this judicial process, Mister Drake, do not embarrass yourself. You will be given your chance to speak."

"And when the hell will that be?"

"I'll let you---" Bruce paused, his head turning to the windows. Tim turned too, for a shrill whine, like an engine pushed to its limits, had perforated the air.

One by one, the Knights began to stir, uneasy. Bruce slowly returned his attention to Tim, even as the noise grew louder. "As I was saying, I'll---"

The plate glass windows shattered inward, and each and every person in the room suddenly dropped to their knees, writhing, hands over their ears. Tim gritted his teeth, his mind screaming sonic pulse!

The pulse died down, though the Knights were slow in rising. All of a sudden, a great, sleek vehicle was hovering just outside the window. Its nose was bullet-shaped, while its rear sprouted deadly-looking fins. A small bubble-dome cockpit rose from the center, and a great silver bat symbol glinted from the sides.

The cockpit whirred open, and Jim Gordon stuck his head out. "Come on!" he bellowed, and Tim obediently shuffled off toward the window, cursing his shackles.

"No!" Bruce, the only other person up and moving, hurtled the judge's bench, and caught Tim in a flying tackle. As they wrestled, Gordon disappeared back into the cockpit, and reappeared with a rifle of some sort in the crook of his elbow. He took careful, deliberate aim, and fired.

An electronic pulse of white energy took Bruce in the shoulder, spinning him around, unconscious. Tim caught the old man as he fell, and dragged him along. A few spectators were pointing and yelling, and inside of seconds the entire weight of the Knights of Gotham

would be upon him. He almost broke into a sweat.

"Closer!" he hollered to Gordon, who inched the craft nearer the window. Tim tossed Bruce's body across onto the hood of the vehicle, then jumped himself. As he settled into the cockpit, Gordon dragged the former Dark Knight in as well, and shoved what looked like a throttle lever up to full.

"What is this thing?" Tim asked, appreciative, as they zoomed down Main Street.

"Batmobile," Gordon said, deadpan. Tim smiled.

Bruce realized his head was pounding the instant he awoke, then that that was the least of his worries. His wrists were bound tightly around what felt like an old wooden chair, and someone was droning on in the background. He was dimly aware that the speaker was addressing him.

Tim and Gordon leaned on the cave wall, Tim still in costume minus the mask. Somehow being swaddled in Kevlar made him more confident, more sure of himself. It was a confidence he needed desperately if he were to see this interrogation through. "Still with us, Bruce?"

Bruce was groggy, but attentive now. Attentive enough, in fact, to slide one finger across the side of his uniform cufflink, and hope no one had noticed. "What do you want?" he rasped.

"We're shutting you down, Bruce," Tim announced. "You've taken this thing too far. You've fallen a long way. Your beliefs, your ideals, they've been lost in the passage of time. When did you start believing that the end justifies the means?" It was a rhetorical question, and Bruce bit back his venomous reply. Tim continued, "I'm not going to take you out of power alone Bruce. I know that all this can't be solely your fault. There must be some other influence. Who is it, Bruce? Who's pulling the strings?"

Bruce fixed his eyes on the floor, doggedly refusing to respond. "Who?" Tim pressed. "All right, let me ask you this? The Commissioner here tells me you spent half the Wayne fortune ransoming him out. How'd you afford all this? Where's the money coming from?"

Bruce's gaze never wavered, his eyes boring into his leather boots.

This was painful, Gordon thought, and he slipped out of the little chamber into the larger cavern, the main area of the Batcave. His men still milled around, conversing in small groups, or playing with various gadgets. A few were carefully examining the Batmobile, and he joined them.

"It's a helluva nice ride, Commish," one of them, Officer Rick Leonardi, offered.

Gordon nodded. "I wouldn't mind pulling traffic detail if they let me ride in one of these."

There were a few good-natured smiles around, and Leonardi began to respond, when a low rumble filled their ears. Gordon tensed, glancing

around. Flecks of rock and plaster were beginning to fall. What was happening? "Everybody to cover!" he barked, for lack of anything more constructive to say. His first duty was to his men, and he relished it, intertwined as it was with danger and self-sacrifice.

Tim glanced up as the rumble intensified, but something drew his eyes back to Bruce, who was smiling a smile that was almost ghoulish. "I thought you knew me better, old chum. Always prepared."

What was that supposed to mean? Tim bolted to the entrance of the chamber, in time to witness a huge section of the cave ceiling collapse downward onto a couple of GCPD officers. Before the dust had even attempted to settle, Knights were spilling into the room, firing from the hip and screaming orders and threats at the top of their lungs. They were not restraining themselves, Tim realized, for their energy weapons cut swift and jagged holes in their targets. The cave was suddenly awash with chaos, Everyone running to and fro, the Knights and the GCPD slowly drawing to opposite sides of the great room. Someone had slipped into the Batcave Armory, and was distributing conventional handguns and rifles to Gordon's people, but they were still decidedly outgunned. Gordon himself, Tim saw, was unarmed, crouched behind the Batmobile as a hail of energy passed overhead.

Tim ducked back into the little interrogation chamber, wild-eyed. "For the love of God, Bruce!" he bellowed, "People are dying out there!" Bruce stared back, indignant. "You've become what you despise!"

"Desperate times call for desperate measures!" Bruce shouted back over the rising clamor, "People die all the time! Sacrifices have to be made for the greater good!"

"That's not what you used to think, dammit! You used to have respect for life!"

"I was naive then!" Bruce was flushed, and he was straining against his bonds. "The people don't need to be protected from super-villains and aliens, they need to be protected from themselves! Some of them have to die, so that others can live!"

Tim was very uneasy about the timing of this philosophical debate, but was a bout to shoot back a biting reply nonetheless, when an energy blast found its way into the chamber. He ducked, whirling toward the entrance, where Jim Gordon appeared suddenly, bleeding profusely from his side.

Tim caught the old man as he stumbled forward, and eased him to the cave floor. Gordon cursed long and hard, screwed his eyes shut, and then finally looked straight at Bruce, with nothing but disdain apparent on his face. "You used to be my hero," he said, and then faded into death's inviting grasp.

Bruce went pale, swooning slightly, his gaze latched to his old friends. "Jim..." he murmured, then again, drifting into a panicked sort of stupor. Tim did his best to ignore them both, though the display had brought tears to his eyes. He bolted into the larger cavern, snatching the energy pistol from a fallen Knight and loosing a few volleys before diving behind a stalagmite.

The battle finished itself quickly. Cover was easy to come by in the Batcave, and Gordon's people had been well trained. Inside of five hellish minutes, most of the Knights had been dispatched, and their comrades-in-arms bid a hasty retreat. After a long moment of silence, Tim rose from his place, despite his protesting muscles, and stalked back to the interrogation chamber, where Bruce had regained some measure of composure.

The former Dark Knight looked straight at Tim. "He was a friend," he murmured. "I killed him."

Tim's heart went out to the old man, but he kept his mouth shut. This train of thought should not be impeded. Bruce was close to breaking point.

"Luthor... Lex Luthor is the source of the funds. He's... he's been pulling some strings."

Tim nodded. "Help me, Bruce. Help me shut him down. Help atone for what you've done."

Bruce's chest heaved with emotion, and Tim helped him from his chair onto shaky legs. With each step he took, he grew more confident, until finally Tim could let go.

Bruce marched out onto the impromptu battlefield, and averted his eyes from those of the dead and the wounded. Instead, he marched past a titanium door into the Armory, where he quickly found what he was looking for.

He emerged as the Batman, costumed from head to toe, and looking like he meant business. Tim couldn't help but grin from ear to ear.

Lex Luthor was a busy man by any account. Aside from his numerous and growing 'unofficial' business interests, he had a slew of legitimate businesses to run, if only to keep the IRS happy. So it was not unusual that he be found barricaded in his office at LexCorp Tower, Metropolis, at two in the morning, slaving over a computer console, his jet-black Armani suit becoming more and more ruffled.

The light from Luthor's office was the only one in the building, and made him easy to pinpoint. From a weathered old brownstone across the street, Tim readied a grapple-gun, and passed it to Bruce--- to Batman.

Batman wasn't in the mood to enjoy himself, but since he'd retaken the Mantle of the Bat, his step had been firmer, his posture that much straighter. He was himself again, noble and proud.

"Ready when you are," Tim offered, and they plunged into the great concrete chasm between buildings. Simultaneously, their grapple line lanced out, finding purchase and reeling in.

Tim's feet connected with the wall of LexCorp Tower first, and he was already climbing when he heard Batman touch down with a gentle thump.

As they scaled, Tim rapped a knuckle against one of the window panes that lined the building's facade. "Bruce," he muttered, "how do you plan on getting in? This stuff's bound to be everything-proof."

A flash of resolute conviction passed over Batman's face. "There won't be a problem," he declared.

Soon they were level with Luthor's office window. As Batman's shadow fell over the businessman, he whirled in surprise, taken aback. He quickly recovered, however, and jabbed a button that sent the window whirring open.

"Bruce!" he cried, smiling warmly, and rushing forth to take the Dark Knight's glove, "I'd heard you were abducted! I was just about to have my men join the search, but I see you're okay---"

Batman straight-armed him back, over his desk and into a heap on the floor.

Luthor straightened his tie, as Tim took up a position to Bruce's right, ready for action. "What is the meaning of this? Is this about the check? Look, I'm having a bit of a cash-flow problem, and---"

Batman cut him off, hoisting him into the air. "It ends now, Luthor," he growled. "I want out. I'm going to pay for what I did to Gotham City. And I'm taking you down with me."

Luthor's expression wavered, but he resolutely adapted a smarmy grin once more. "I see. And that's the state of things, is it?" He harrumphed, and moved to his desk. "You know, I always thought that when this time came, it would be that muscle-bound manic buddy of yours, Superman, who'd be carting me off. So," his hand darted to a switch beneath his desk, "I'd had a surprise prepared just for him. But I suppose it'll do." He dropped into his plush leather chair, steepling his fingers. "I've just armed a six megaton nuclear explosive somewhere in the sewer system beneath Metropolis. Only I know the exact location, and only I know the deactivation code. Unless you gentlemen retreat from whence you came within five minutes, I'll destroy myself and the entire city." His grin widened. "Can I offer you a drink?"

Batman's hands coiled into fists, and he started for the window, but Tim stopped him. "Stay here. Watch him. I'll get it." He unclipped Batman's utility belt, and clipped it about his own waist. "It's the least I can do." Then he was gone, rappelling down the side of the building.

Batman remained stock-still, letting his gaze penetrate Luthor's. But the villain was unfazed.

"This just isn't your day, is it, Bruce? Sad, really. It was a beautiful partnership."

"Partnership?" Bruce sniffed. "You manipulated me. You used me."

"More than you think." Luthor planted both feet on his desk. "I was the Supremator." He laughed aloud at the irony of it all, a laugh that quickly disintegrated into a coughing fit when an enraged Dark Knight pounced, and seized him by the neck.

Tim dropped into the sewer, lashing the beam of a flashlight about.

It was a typical sewer, though Tim could've sworn it was just a mite cleaner than Gotham's. He put the thought aside, and began to run, ankle deep in what he liked to think of as water.

He produced a Geiger counter, banking on the theory that Luthor's bomb was illegal, and therefore less than sanitary. There was bound to be some radiation leakage. Sure enough, the counter produced a strong, steady beep that intensified as he ran. He sprinted for at least two minutes straight, making only one wrong turn that he hastily corrected. Finally, he found himself at a tunnel junction, in its center a rather large device labeled HAZARDOUS in six different languages.

With a glance at his wrist chronometer, he set to work.

Batman flipped Luthor across his back, and straight into the bank of tele-monitors that lined one wall. With a huff, Luthor raised himself, only to crumple once more as the vigilante delivered a crushing right hook.

Batman was in the process of deciding what attack to use next, when his cowl radio crackled. "Go ahead," he commanded.

"Bruce, I found it," came Tim's voice, interwoven with heavy breathing. "But there's no access panel or anything. Just a keypad. The only way to shut it down's gonna be with the deactivation code."

"How much time?" Batman snapped curtly.

"About a minute and a half."

"The code," he growled at Luthor, who only smiled back, through streams of sweat cascading down his face.

"Please, Bruce, there's only one way you'll get me to stop the bomb. Leave. Did you not understand the rules?"

"Fifty seconds," Tim barked into Batman's ear, his voice rising.

Batman released a blistering punch to Luthor's midsection, doubling him over. "Dammit, Luthor, now!" He seized the villain's face, and twisted it up to meet his eyes.

"Thirty!"

He saw something there, something he should've realized before. The eyes were wild, panicked, full of an unholy desire for...

"Twenty!"

...for self-preservation, for...

"Ten!"

...survival...

"For God's sake, Bruce, get the code---"

Tim was cut off in mid-sentence by the bomb's explosion. He tossed himself backward, burying his face in the sludge, as if it would do any good. His head pounded as he imagined the firestorm passing overhead, imagined his own flesh searing...

He slowly raised his head. Why hadn't he been vaporized. Why were the walls still standing. He glanced around, and discovered that the entire chamber was covered in yellow paint. He gasped, a tear escaping onto his cheek. The bomb had not been a nuclear weapon at all, but a... a cheap party trick, a bluff!

He lifted a piece of the casing from the slime, and scanned it with the Geiger counter. Sure enough, it had been coated with some sort of radioactive gel, just enough to emit the signature of nuclear material. He laughed aloud, a laugh that carried through his microphone into Batman's cowl.

Batman smiled, leaning over Lex Luthor's quivering form. "I knew it," he said coldly, menacingly. "You value yourself too much. You couldn't kill yourself. It was all a bluff." Every shred of confidence, of attitude, Luthor had had was gone, and the Dark Knight latched a pair of handcuffs about his wrists, an act that brought more satisfaction than any other had in a long time.

It was all over. Justice had been done.

Bruce was tried under international law, and, though he petitioned for a prison State-side he wound up in a Singapore penitentiary with a fifteen year sentence hanging over his head. That wasn't so bad, after all. It was better than Luthor's 'life without parole.'

Tim Drake was Bruce's first visitor, and they made small talk solemnly for the best part of half an hour before the young man turned to leave.

"Tim," Bruce called, and Tim paused at the door to the visiting room. "Stay in Gotham. Fix up the mess I made. I... I'd like to see you around when I get out."

Tim let go of a quivering sigh, but he smiled and nodded. That had been exactly what he'd planned. "I've gotta go now," he muttered. "You take care."

Bruce only smiled, and withdrew to his cell without a word. Tim watched him leave, and couldn't help remarking on the cruelty of Fate. Of course, Bruce would have it no other way. He'd committed a crime, and he would face the consequences.

And in fifteen years, a living legend would once more grace the night sky. END

End
file.